

Lawyers coping with attorney shortage in Yakima County

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Attorneys work in court Thursday, May 5, 2022, in Yakima County Jail in Yakima, Wash.

[Evan Abell / Yakima Herald-Republic](#)

Grocery-store workers and restaurant staff are not the only jobs that are in high demand these days.

In Yakima County, attorneys are also in short supply.

“When we first opened and posted our first position in 2013, we had 20, 30 people apply,” said Tim Hall, a partner with Hall and Gilliland in Yakima who’s trying to fill a vacancy. “Now, we get one, two or three applicants.”

At the county level, both Yakima County Prosecuting Attorney Joe Brusica and Paul Kelley, director of the Department of Assigned Counsel, are trying to fill vacancies in their offices.

"We're all struggling to combat the problem that we're not getting applicants, and when we do, it's a lateral move," Brusic said, referring to when a prosecutor from one agency moves over to another. "Robbing Peter to pay Paul doesn't help."

The problem, as Hall and the others see it, is a combination of not enough law school graduates to replace those who retire or leave the profession, as well as the challenge of paying off law-school student loans on the prevailing wages offered in the Yakima Valley.

While Hall is hopeful that economic forces will bring the situation back into balance, Brusic said Yakima County is looking at making its wages more competitive, as well as reaching out to law schools to recruit. And a local university is teaming up with the state's law schools to try to get more people of color to go into law and, hopefully, work in the community.

Currently, there are 438 attorneys in Yakima County, according to the Washington State Bar Association's latest numbers, putting it in the top nine for the state. It's 1.4% of the 31,124 attorneys in the state, a figure which also includes those with inactive, honorary or emeritus licenses as well as sitting judges.

One factor in the equation is there are fewer law school graduates, attorneys say. When he attended Gonzaga University's law school in 2000, Hall said incoming classes were around 140-160, but it soared to 240 shortly afterward, and in 2015 the numbers dropped.

American Bar Association records show Gonzaga's total enrollment in 2011 was 506, with the 2016 enrollment at 305 and climbing to 449 last year. University of Washington's law school had 545 students in 2011, compared to 498 in 2017 and 492 last year.

Seattle University's law school had 1,002 students in 2011, then went to 609 in 2017 and was at 677 last year, according to the bar association's numbers.

Brusic said fewer graduates are interested in becoming prosecutors, and he doesn't think law schools are actively encouraging them to go in that direction.

"With the problems police and prosecutors have locally, a lot of younger people don't want to go into those professions," Brusic said.

Another factor is student debt. A law-school graduate can come out of school owing \$150,000 or more in student loans, depending on the school, which Hall and Brusic said can make a new attorney think twice about taking a job that pays between \$60,000 and \$70,000 a year.

Even with the 5% pay increase Yakima County Commissioners approved recently to address staff shortages, Brusic said the starting wage for a prosecutor with no experience is \$66,486. For one of the county's public defenders, it's \$66,490.

Geography also works against recruiting lawyers, Kelley said, as some people may not be as interested in going to Central Washington as opposed to a more populous area where pay and job opportunities may be better.

And those who come in from outside the area to work here may not stick around for long, Brusic said. He said those are the ones who are less likely to put down roots in the community and plan to move on in a couple years.

Kelley said finding attorneys was a challenge before the pandemic, which has not helped. He's trying to fill three vacancies to bring his staff up to 20.

Like people in other professions, some attorneys saw the pandemic-related shutdowns as a way to reassess their career goals and choose to either retire or find a different profession.

"Being a lawyer is a fairly stressful job," Hall said.

And for Brusic and Kelley, vacant positions mean their attorneys must shoulder more work.

Brusic, who said his office is short five attorneys, has prosecutors handling up to 120 cases a year.

"From my perspective, they work hard every day for the people of this county," Brusic said.



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Kelley's attorneys are limited to how many cases they can take by state court rules. The rules ensure that attorneys can effectively represent their indigent clients, with a limit of 150 felony cases per attorney per year. Kelley said the rules also weight cases based on the seriousness of the crime, which reduces the actual number of cases an attorney can take on.

"So far, we've been OK," Kelley said. "But if our numbers don't improve, and filings go up, some decisions will have to be made with how to handle it and maintain standards.

"It's a delicate dance that we have to do to maintain it. We have to be true to those standards, or we'll get in trouble."

Brusic agrees.

"We want competent public defenders," Brusic said. "We want them to do work hard and do their job effectively." Otherwise, he said cases get thrown out on appeal because someone didn't have an effective lawyer representing them.

Hall is hopeful that economic forces will resolve the problem eventually, as the vacancies will result in more people deciding to go to law school to fill the need and bring supply back in line with demand.

Brusic said the county is looking at its wages to make it competitive with other agencies, and he's also thinking about going to job fairs at law schools to pitch the benefits of working as a Yakima County prosecutor.

"There's more money in private practice, but what I stress to the attorneys here is that there's a richness to this job that you won't find in private practice," Brusic said.

Heritage University in Toppenish announced this year that it is working with Seattle University, Gonzaga and the University of Washington on a program to encourage students, particularly Latino and Native American students, to consider going to law school. It's hoped that program could result in more attorneys in Central Washington.

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